

Date: June 20, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 11

SERMON: Fear, Faith, and Wholeness

Text(s): Luke 8:26-39; Galatians 3:23-29

© 2004 L. R. Kalajainen

When I was a teen-ager, growing up in rural western Pennsylvania, one of the popular things to do on a date or an outing with friends on a Friday or Saturday evening was to drive out along Route 18 to see if we could catch a glimpse of the Green Man. He was a local man who'd had the misfortune to have been struck by lightning during a thunderstorm, and had been left with rather disfiguring facial scars, and his skin had turned green, a rather pastel, sickly shade of green, but very definitely green. I have no idea what the medical or scientific explanation for this phenomenon was, but it certainly made him a local attraction. And on some Friday or Saturday evenings, he had the habit of walking along the road from his home to a pub, where he was known and accepted, but always after dark.

When the local newspaper did an interview with him that rather spoiled the attraction of trying to catch a glimpse of the Green Man. One couldn't read the interview without realizing that here was just an ordinary man, not at all strange or alien in anything but his appearance. He had a family who loved him and friends who accepted him, who because of their relationship to him were able to get past the disfiguring accident that marked him for life and made him an object of tabloid fascination to those who didn't know him.

There are many conditions of life that makes us different from what is commonly perceived as normal— which most of the time simply means the condition of life of the majority of people in a particular setting. And almost always, the condition that makes us different has a socially-alienating effect. One of the most common complaints I've heard over the years from people in the congregations I've served who were suffering from serious physical or mental illness is that while they often feel a real need to

talk about their experience with their disease and the fears they have, the people around them often don't want to listen, but will say things like, "Oh, don't talk like that. Everything's going to be fine, you'll see." Or they'll avoid the person altogether, as is often the case with people with HIV/AIDS or some other frightening condition such as bipolar disorder. The result is, the suffering person is isolated, cut off, abandoned. They are doubly burdened, both by their own fears, and the fears of the other people around them.

Do you remember the scene in Leonard Bernstein's musical *West Side Story*, when Officer Krupke has just told the members of the street gang that they're a bunch of social degenerates, and they sing mockingly that they've just discovered they have a "social disease." All diseases, you see, are social diseases, for they have this isolating and alienating effect on others. That's the essential nature of disease. (I'm using disease in its broadest meaning— not just physical or mental illness, but all the ways in which we experience alienation or brokenness— anything that causes us to be not at ease.) No dis-ease is private. All dis-ease has a corporate and social dimension. And all of us who have ever had a member of our family suffer through a struggle with cancer or with mental illness or with an addiction to alcohol or drugs or the results of sexual abuse know that not only the afflicted individual, but the whole family and all the social relationships in which that individual is embedded are deeply affected and deeply afflicted as well.

We see these social dimensions of disease very clearly in our gospel lesson this morning. Specifically we see both fears— the fear of the suffering person and the fears of those around him because he has become strange or alien to them.

Jesus travels with his disciples to one of the Hellenistic cities located southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It's a predominantly Gentile city, and that explains why the people are herding pigs, something that no Jewish community would do.

As he arrives there, he is confronted by the local equivalent of the Green Man— an insane man who is believed to be possessed by a legion of evil spirits or demons. Whether in our modern world view, we might feel more comfortable calling his condition paranoid schizophrenia rather than possession by evil spirits, is beside the point. In whatever world view you inhabit, the demons are real enough for this man. The point is that he is victimized by forces and powers beyond his control. He is not in his right mind much of the time. He is a soul in torment, and his torment has the effect, like the Green Man's disfiguring marks, of isolating him and alienating him from his fellow townspeople who fear those who are different, and whose behavior is outside familiar norms. It is not only his own personal reality which is distorted and out of control. His affliction has an immediate impact on his community. They too, his family and friends and neighbors, are all in some measure affected and their behavior controlled by the forces that are tormenting him.

A major theme in this story is the fear that manifests itself in this encounter with Jesus. First, we see the fears of the possessed man himself, and this fear is not what we might think—a fear of what he is suffering, so much as it is a fear of what a cure might mean. When he sees Jesus coming, Luke says, *“he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirits to come out of the man.”*

Sometimes when we are suffering we work out our own accommodation with that condition. It becomes the primary point of self-identity. To some extent this is natural; our experiences do shape our understanding of who we are. But there is a tendency for disease to become the primary point of identity to the exclusion of all others, both of our own self-perception as well as the way we are perceived by

others. Instead of seeing ourselves or another person as a person who may have a mental illness or an addiction to drugs or alcohol, we refer to them or ourselves as an alcoholic, a drug addict, a schizophrenic. The disease defines us or the other. And in a way, that releases us from the responsibility of dealing with ourselves or them as real persons. We can confine them to their disease and keep them at arm's length. It also can be a convenient way of releasing ourselves from having to deal with our own dis-ease and seek the wholeness for which we deeply long.

We may long for healing, or think we do. We may wish for transformation, for a new start, for assurance that God's power is at work in us to bring healing. But when the moment comes when we are actually confronted by the possibility of transformation, by the reality of God's presence and healing work, we may be equally afraid. For God's presence and work in our lives always involves transformation. To recognize God's presence in the midst of our suffering is to recognize, as did this insane man, that we're not going to come out of this encounter unchanged. And the prospect of a radical change in our attitudes, our values, our behavior is often a fearful prospect. We even have a saying that we apply to many areas of life that expresses this fear of transformation: “Better the devil we know than the devil we don't.” And this preference for the devils we know affects not only the persons whose devils they are, but those around them as well. Psychologists have a fancy name for this; they call it co-dependency or enabling behavior. But it's really this fear of transformation, fear of the power that can set us or someone close to us free and make us whole; it's really fear of the power of God.

C. S. Lewis once said that getting involved with God is somewhat like going to the dentist to have a severe toothache taken care of. (Now that's a rather shocking metaphor! God is like a dentist?!) We know the tooth is causing us pain and something has to be done about it, but

even so, we dread going to the dentist because we know that no good dentist is going to simply give us painkillers and send us away with the abscess still there. A good dentist will insist on giving us the full treatment. And the full treatment, while it will undoubtedly deliver us from pain in the long term, also stands a good chance of causing us more pain in the short term. Or as Jamie Buckingham in put it rather memorably when commenting on Jesus' statement, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free," tacked on another line: "But first it will make you miserable."

In some ways, we find it easier to come to terms with our own or our loved ones' dis-ease and inappropriate behavior, because it is easier to accept the notion that we have no control over what happens to us, than it is to accept responsibility for our own freedom, our own wholeness. In many cases, we would be content, or think we would, with just a few painkillers. The thought of the full treatment scares us. We want God's help, but we're not sure how much of it we want. To open ourselves to God's work requires courage and faith, or trust; it requires us to become vulnerable, and that's a very scary prospect.

But if one kind of fear we see in this story is the fear of the power of God because it will effect the transformation needed, the second kind of fear is the kind we see in the reaction of the people of the community after Jesus has healed the possessed man. Luke says, "*Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.*"

Why were they afraid? Weren't they thrilled to see their fellow townsman well and in his right mind again? Well, yes and no. Here is where we see the social dimensions of all human dis-ease at work. Of course they were understandably afraid of the man when he was in

the grip of his demons and they were powerless to help him; that's why he was isolated from them and living in the cemetery in the first place. And yes, of course, they would prefer him to be in his right mind. . . or would they really?. If they really want the man to be healed, why then, are they still so afraid that they beg Jesus to leave, even after Jesus restores the man to wholeness and sanity?

Part of it may be simply that they saw the destruction of the herd of pigs as an economic disaster and that anyone who had power to cause that much trouble can't be good to have around. And no doubt, part of it is also their own fear of the power of God and their preference for the devils they know. But I think there's more to their fear than that. There's an element in this fear that is harder to grasp, because it's more subtle.

When transformation comes, particularly to someone else whom we've managed to place in a niche where we can predict and control our relationship to them, that relationship will inevitably change as well. The transformed person is no longer "the crazy man who lives in the cemetery," who can be dismissed or feared or treated as a curiosity. He's no longer "the Green Man." He or she now has a name, a face, a claim on us. This person who was "the other," the alcoholic wife, the abusive father, the drug-addicted teenager, the homeless beggar on the street corner, the next-door neighbor of a different religion or ethnicity, the person with a sexual orientation that is different from ours, the one whose difference permitted us to wall him or her off from us, now demands to be recognized as our brother, our sister, our neighbor to whom we owe the obligation of love. And that is also scary. When the other person no longer fits into the neat box or pigeonhole to which I had consigned him, something is demanded of me that will force me to change as well, to move toward freedom and wholeness myself in new ways. The healing of our own individual brokenness cannot be achieved apart from the healing of the brokenness

in our social relationships as well. If all dis-ease is social, so is all healing or wholeness. To be whole as an individual means to be whole in community as well.

This is why St. Paul, in the passage we heard from his letter to the Galatians this morning, makes such an issue of the fact that all the human boxes or divisions into which we place people are part of the social alienation of dis-ease, of the brokenness of humanity. These human boxes that we have so carefully constructed in which to pigeonhole people who are different from us—*Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, male or female*, or whatever other categories we may devise for our own place and time— are abolished by the transformation and healing of human brokenness that has begun to be manifested by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into a new personal and social reality as well. We are joined to one another in new ways. We become part of a new community where alienation gives way to solidarity and mutual compassion, where competition gives way to cooperation, where, in Paul's words, we "bear one another's burdens and so live out the law of Christ." We bear one another's burdens because, as he affirms, "*we are all one in Christ Jesus.*" To accept one another as we ourselves are accepted, as beloved and free children of God, is to begin to experience the wholeness for which we and all human beings were created. It is a wholeness that we can never attain or experience in isolation; it is a wholeness that is only known in community. "I know of no such thing as solitary Christianity," said John Wesley. "All holiness is social holiness." But to become that kind of holy and whole community, we will have to be willing to let go of our fears, let go of our preference for the devils we know, and open ourselves up to the full treatment— nothing less than learning how to love one another as deeply and as fully and as personally as God in Christ has loved us.